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ABSTRACT

A project using a computerized concordancing program in combination with a computerized corpus of academic texts to teach academic English is described. It is intended for native speakers and learners of English, and focuses on frequently-used words common to all academic fields. The vocabulary was selected from an academic word list, and consisted of about 250 items used for various functions of academic writing: stating topic; referring to the literature; expressing opinions tentatively; explaining processes used; reporting research of others; linking ideas correctly; and drawing conclusions. The concordancing program was then used to determine frequency of the terms' use. Resulting lists present students with multiple examples of academic vocabulary items in context. Questions concerning word use accompany the lists. Initial student response to the materials indicates that because the mode of presentation is new, some guidelines for use are needed; students should be instructed to: (1) look at the words surrounding the key term, thinking of meaning; (2) familiarize themselves with patterns of language surrounding the term to answer the questions; (3) practice key terms without referring to the concordance; and (4) create their own writing using the terms to fulfill a particular writing function. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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TEACHING THE VOCABULARY OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH VIA CONCORDANCES

A PAPER PRESENTED AT THE TESOL CONFERENCE
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INTRODUCTION

This project uses the concordancing program, *Microconcord*, with the *Microconcord Corpus of Academic Texts** to introduce students unfamiliar with the language of academic discourse to some of the most important items of the vocabulary of academic English. It is intended for native speakers of English as well as students of non English speaking background. The project deals with frequently used words which are common to all fields of academic learning, not attempting to include specialized or technical vocabulary items associated with specific disciplines.

CHOOSING VOCABULARY ITEMS

Vocabulary items were initially chosen from the University Word List cited in Nation (1990). From this very extensive list we selected items according to frequency of use and our perception of the extent to which their investigation would be helpful to students. We narrowed this list down to about 250 examples and grouped them under various functions of academic writing.

During a visit to Macquarie University, Tim Johns from the University of Birmingham made the point that students do not need to master a wide range of academic terms in order to write acceptable academic essays, but that they need to be competent users of a restricted set of vocabulary items and combinations for each function required in academic writing. This is a reflection of Michael McCarthy's advice to learners of vocabulary in general:

> there are many words you don't need at all and there are other words that you simply need to understand when you read or hear them. Finally, there are words which you need to be able to use yourself. Clearly, you need to spend most time learning this last group.
> (McCarthy, 1994:2)

With this in mind, we have chosen to concentrate on a restricted set of key items of vocabulary for each different function of academic writing. They are all frequently used words which adequately serve the various and necessary functions of academic writing and which students can extend themselves once they become more confident.

We hope the material we are assembling will help students become competent users of key words which serve the following functions:

- **Stating the topic of your writing**
- **Referring to the literature**
- **Expressing opinions tentatively**
- **Explaining processes undertaken in a study**
- **Reporting the research of others**
- **Linking ideas correctly**
- **Drawing conclusions**

FREQUENCY

• Microconcord was used to establish the frequency of use of particular items in the corpus. We focused on frequently used terms, tending to exclude words that appeared less than once every 6,000 words. However we made some exceptions for words that, although not used so frequently in the corpus of professional, published work, we nevertheless considered useful for student writers. Such words include *unlikely* and *summarize* .

METHOD

Assuming that university students are assisted in learning to use academic vocabulary correctly through the constant process of reading and listening to academic language, we are using concordancing to present them with the opportunity to condense and intensify this process through exposure to multiple examples of the same vocabulary item in context, along with guided opportunities for research, practise and improvisation using this particular lexical item.

The *Microconcord Corpus of Academic Texts* contains approximately 1.016.000 words taken from academic texts on the arts, belief and religion, applied science, science and social science. Concordances of 100 characters were obtained for the student research section, concordances of 400 characters for use in exercises and improvisation activities.

The material is being prepared in hard copy and is intended for independent study. Initial piloting showed that some students were puzzled by the cut-off sentences of the one-line concordances and daunted by the difficulty of the authentic

academic texts. This mode of learning is quite new to many students, so we included a few words of advice, explaining that all the examples used are taken from authentic academic texts from a wide range of disciplines that students may not always be familiar with. They are therefore likely to find a lot of words and ideas that they may not understand. We've gone to pains to emphasize that they NEED NOT understand them all. Our concern is simply that they become very familiar with the use and meaning of the **key words**, with the **patterns of language** in which they are used and the kinds of words that are frequently found **before and after these key words**.

Concordancing has enabled us to present the student with multiple examples of the vocabulary items in context. The student can examine these concordances to discover how they are used and to answer questions on their use. The presentation of concordances and guided research are followed by exercises enabling students to ensure that they are using the item correctly. Answer suggestions are provided for each unit.

The pathway for learning is as follows:

- LOOK at concordances for the key term and words surrounding it, thinking of meaning.

- FAMILIARIZE yourself with the patterns of language surrounding the key term by referring to the concordances as you complete the tasks

- PRACTISE key terms without referring to the concordances.

- CREATE your own piece of writing using the terms studied to fulfil a particular function of academic writing.

My ability to select appropriate, representative concordances improved with experience. I developed the technique of using the delete key on all concordances of a particular word (they do not disappear until they are zapped), looking at the words and word groups on each side of the key word which can be shown in alphabetical order, and then inserting and saving concordances which provide a representative sample of frequently used contexts.

The word ISSUE/S, for example, appeared once every 3,019 words (338 times), eliciting nine densely packed pages of one-line concordances. To select concordances for student research that would fit onto one page and which would provide a representative sample of the use of the word in context, I examined the words preceding and following it, and found that some adjectives (eg *environmental, moral, political*) appeared with noticeable frequency and so needed to be included, and that frequent prepositions (eg *for, of, in*) also needed to be brought to students' attention. The exercises which I developed for students to familiarize themselves with frequent patterns suggested their own further questions leading the student to discover, on the basis of the primary source of the language itself, with no mention or rules or need to resort to grammar books, the situations in which the different prepositions are used.

CONCLUSION

Teachers and students who have piloted the materials have commented that it is a helpful, very different and innovative approach to vocabulary learning. Reactions have varied from finding it interesting and enjoyable in the way word games are interesting to comments that it requires considerable time and patience. It appears that personality and previous experience of learners influence reactions.

Those working on the project have become increasingly convinced of the enormous value of concordancing in the development of teaching materials focusing on vocabulary and grammar, noticing that these two areas inevitably overlap.

* *Microconcord*. Oxford University Press. 1993
Microconcord Corpus of Academic Texts. Oxford University Press. 1993

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